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**SPEAKING IN (M)OTHER TONGUES**  
**The Role of Language in Jamaica Kincaid's**  
*The Autobiography of My Mother*

*by Giselle Liza Anatol*

The speech [that stays] in the belly is the child of your mother, the  
speech [that springs] from your mouth is the child of your father.

—Fulani proverb<sup>1</sup>

As is evident by the prevalence of broken mother-daughter links in Caribbean women's literature, many female authors of the region write "against" motherhood. African-Caribbean women in particular must reconcile themselves with a maternal role that is not only affected by the legacies of colonialism, including the metaphor of the "mother country," but is also intricately bound up in the violence and dehumanization of enslavement. Jamaica Kincaid is one of many contemporary women authors who write out of a history in which maternity and gender have been manipulated in the name of an anti-colonial, Caribbean project. Her novels exemplify the idea that an unproblematic representation of biological motherhood seems near to impossible for Caribbean women; her fiction circles round and round the troubled concept of motherhood, constantly replaying a situation of loss, longing, lack, and unanswerable desire.

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid addresses the pervading notion of inescapable bonds between mother and daughter. The 1976 novel from which Kincaid derives her title and premise contains a U.S. version of this dynamic. In Rosellen Brown's *The Autobiography of My Mother*, set in New York City in the 1970s, Gerda Stein and her daughter Renata are embroiled in an exhausting and ultimately devastating battle, yet they are incapable of extracting themselves from the relationship that makes them so miserable. Gerda eventually comes to the conclusion that her life and her daughter's are inextricably entwined; in fact, she decides that they have but one single life to share: "I had not known we were to share but one life between us, so that the fuller mine is, the more empty hers." At another point in the novel, Renata, who is also a mother, speculates: "Will I have to die for [my daughter] to get free of me, free of the part of her history I carry around? . . . [My mother is] not my history only: my future. She won't die, she'll be waiting for me in the graveyard no matter what" (241

and 207, respectively). Kincaid focuses on this issue throughout her *Autobiography*; in her 1996 Caribbean version, the narrator's mother is the daughter's seemingly inescapable past, history, present, and future.

The Antiguan author creates a protagonist who is inordinately preoccupied with her deceased birth mother. The novel's development suggests that it is Xuela Richardson's obsession with this absent "natural" mother, and not the lack of a mother in and of itself, that inhibits her ability to have sustained relationships with other women in her life.<sup>2</sup> Her fixation causes her to mythologize her mother, thus creating an image of motherhood that is impossible for any other woman, including herself, to live up to. The identification of the birth mother as the only "real" or "natural" mother is a troubling concept that must be interrogated, both in Kincaid's novel and in the larger society. Redefining the categories of "motherhood" and "family" is essential if women are to find ways out of the constrictive roles determined by patriarchal dictates.

Investigating the role of language is one way to examine the complicated mother-daughter relationships in *Autobiography*. One's first language is often spoken of in terms of maternal connection: it is referred to as the "mother tongue." Throughout the Caribbean, the idea of having a "mother tongue" is firmly grounded within a nationalist consciousness, yet the gendered implications are rarely explored within the established nationalist rhetoric. Jamaican writer Velma Pollard provides the following definition of the mother tongue: "Mothertongue as it is traditionally defined . . . is that one language the individual first acquires and learns to use in communicating with other people" (252). Although her definition does not specify gender, women's presences are elicited by the very term. One might be reminded of French feminist Hélène Cixous' *écriture féminine*, the language that approximates the presymbolic, early communication that is said to transpire between baby and mother. According to the Fulani proverb cited in my epigraph, the "mother tongue" remains at the center of one's being, even when other languages may be learned and employed, springing easily from one's lips. It is clear that gender, maternity, nation, and culture have all been inextricably bound together, and the maternal tie gets problematically cast as inescapable and unbreakable.

In light of this, Kincaid's protagonist's use of language can be analyzed not only for its nationalist messages, but also for indications of how women fit into the nationalist project and society as a whole. Xuela employs several languages that could be considered her "mother tongue": besides "standard" English, she also speaks a "vernacular" form of English and a French-lexified Creole, or "patois."<sup>3</sup> It is my contention that her use of language serves to chart her developing anti-colonial attitudes. It helps her to formulate a postcolonial subjectivity in addition to a strongly woman-centered identity. At the same time, however, the narrator's development is circumscribed by definitions of nation and gender that are too narrow in scope. This impediment suggests larger problems for political nationalist discourses and for feminist/womanist discourses as well.

Language has long been a contested site for people of color in the Americas.<sup>4</sup> The distinctive ways in which women have been involved in these linguistic struggles, however, are often overlooked. Prior to the European invasion of the Caribbean, Carib

Indians raided Arawak Indian settlements for women, known for their agricultural skills. Language played into the strict sexual division of labor practiced by the Caribs: “men spoke one language, and women another” (Reddock 28). Literary critic Eric Cheyfitz details how European explorers subsequently arrived in the islands and subjected Amerindian peoples not only to “linguistic colonization,” but also to the feat of rhetorical acrobatics that constructed them as human-flesh-eaters in the European popular imaginary. Columbus’s translations of his Arawak guides’ descriptions of the Carib Indians merged “carib” and “cannibal” and brought the image of the flesh-eating West Indian savage to Europe.<sup>5</sup>

In later years, language was purported to be a means of controlling people of African descent. It has been alleged that colonizers’ fears of uprising caused them to try to separate members of the same African language groups (in transport from the Slave Coast as well as during sale in the Americas). Trinidadian poet Marlene Nourbese Philip highlights this notion in “Discourse on the Logic of Language”: “EDICT I: Every owner of slaves shall, wherever possible, ensure that his slaves belong to as many ethno-linguistic groups as possible. If they cannot speak to each other, they cannot then foment rebellion and revolution” (*She Tries* 30). However, as is becoming evident in more recent Africanist research, ethnic identity in West Africa was fluid and multiple, and people could belong to several different communities, including groups based upon shared language. Certain Africans’ ability to language-switch thus served as a site of resistance in the Americas; the aptitude for languages enabled them to avoid slave masters’ attempts at complete control of their interactions and experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Colonists during the slave era professed that enslaved women spoke much “worse” than their male counterparts. The condemnation of women’s language most likely came from slaveholders’ anxieties over women’s verbal power to instigate insurrection: women often sang in Creole to raise morale in the fields and also to pass information for planned uprisings. Women’s songs overtly mocked masters and subtly threatened them. An example can be found in a story related by a plantation owner named de Gannes; as he bathed in a stream on his property in 1805 Trinidad, twelve black women approached him. They sang and danced, expressing the revolutionary spirit that had reached them from Haiti:

*Pain c’est viande beque* [Bread is white flesh]  
*Vin c’est sang beque* [Wine is white blood]  
*San Domingo* [the name of the island before Toussaint  
 L’Ouverture’s independence movement in 1804]  
*Nous va boire sang beque* [We will drink white blood]  
*San Domingo.* (Bush 79)

Ancestral languages and creolized forms thus connected enslaved people to various West African cultures and communities and to a resistance movement. However, they could also serve as a liability when people made attempts at freedom: language became a crucial determinant in the identification and capture of escaped slaves. Historian Hilary Beckles notes that when women in particular ran away, if they

dressed well and spoke “good” English, their chances of escaping dramatically increased; because of their sexualized position in slave society, women could often pass as the trusted mistresses of white males.<sup>7</sup>

The imposition of European languages on African-descended bondspeople in the Caribbean ultimately served to emphasize the European-engineered dichotomy of “civilized” versus “savage.”<sup>8</sup> In *Black Skin, White Masks*, his renowned work on the double consciousness and inferiority complexes of the 20th-century African-Caribbean subject, Frantz Fanon remarked: “The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language. . . . Mastery of language affords remarkable power” (18). For the colonized subject, gaining proficiency in the so-called “standard” language meant more closely resembling the white masters and their European culture. The use of European languages indicated an affiliation with the ruling class, as well as an alleged innate intelligence: “education, class status, and an ability to speak ‘standard English’ will usually be synonymous” in postcolonial societies (Ashcroft, et al 77). In contrast, creolized language forms have long been denoted as inferior, their speakers often branded with degraded social status.<sup>9</sup> On some islands, Creole was vigorously discouraged although it was the first language of more than half of the population. As Fanon notes: “In school, the children of Martinique are taught to scorn dialect. One avoids *Creolisms*. Some families completely forbid the use of Creole, and mothers ridicule their children for speaking it” (20). During various political and social campaigns in the Caribbean, people employed Creole as a symbol of resistance, making linguistic action a supremely political action; however, in day-to-day life, Creole was still conventionally perceived as “bad” or “broken” English, Dutch, Spanish, or French. And, as Nourbese Philip notes, because the function of language is “to name and give voice to the experience and image and so house the being,” this negative terminology invalidates the Creole cultural reality and alienates the speakers of Creole from their experiences (“Absence” 276).

How, then, does the reader of Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* evaluate Xuela’s first emergence as a speaker? The narrator’s vehement anti-colonial attitude appears incompatible with the fact that when she enters the realm of orality, she employs the English language even though she has never heard anyone speak it in the house of Ma Eunice, her foster mother. As the narrator goes on to state, however: “That the first words I said were in the language of a people I would never like or love is not now a mystery to me; everything in my life, good or bad, to which I am inextricably bound is a source of pain” (7). Her association of pain and English—the language identified by Benedict Anderson as “the pre-eminent world-imperial language” (18)—is clearly anti-colonial. Like Caliban in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Xuela enters into the “master” discourse to condemn her colonizer. Her words resonate with a passage from Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, in which the author speaks of the systematic attempts to eradicate the everyday languages of colonized people: “For isn’t it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime?” She goes on to refer to the colonizing process as one that not only took away the homelands of African peoples, but also resulted in “worst and most painful [loss] of all”—that of native language (31).

The first speech episode in *The Autobiography of My Mother* does not hinge exclusively upon Caribbean and Black Nationalist and concerns, however. As stated previously, issues of nation and issues of gender cannot be separated for women of the archipelago. Xuela's first execution of spoken language should indeed be Creole, the language by which she has been surrounded since her birth. According to Anderson, this is her "vernacular mother-tongue," the language to which a nation's citizens have access "from the cradle"; it is the language "encountered at mother's knee and parted with only at the grave" (119 and 154, respectively). In many cultures, women are associated with language because they are in constant contact with children during the primal years of language development. However, the image of the beatific mother encouraging her children to speak historically did not apply to women of African descent in the Caribbean. The dominant colonial class portrayed enslaved women as actively lascivious temptresses, fickle wives, and apathetic mothers. These women could not reign in a domestic haven because they were compelled to work for their masters from sunrise to far past sundown. If their children were not sold to another plantation, they were typically cared for by others. Anderson's discussion fails to acknowledge these cultural differences in mothers' roles and representations. Furthermore, the critic romanticizes and essentializes the primacy of mothers' places in society. He suggests that without a mother, a child has no access to the language that connects him or her to a nation of belonging. His description of "the contingency and ineluctability of our particular genetic heritage, our gender, our life-era, our physical capabilities, our mother-tongue, and so forth" thus stands in stark contrast to Xuela's initiation to the spoken word; this event provides an apparent contradiction to the idea of an "ineluctable" mother tongue (Anderson 10).<sup>10</sup>

Xuela's failure to speak Creole seems to ride on Kincaid's teasing out a very literal interpretation of the phrase "mother tongue." In the narrator's estimation, she lacks a mother. For her there was no "mother's knee"; her foster mother, Ma Eunice, does not represent an adequate substitute. Therefore—rather ironically—although Xuela is immersed in Creole from the time almost immediately after her birth, her alienation from her biological mother results in her rejection of, or alienation from, her "true" mother tongue. Kincaid allows her character the choice of accepting (or denying) a mother tongue that parallels the acceptance (or denial) of a mother. Equally significant is the fact that when Xuela first speaks, she does so to ask for her father, who has missed one of his regular visits. Alfred Richardson's failed appearance concerns the narrator deeply, even though he has never shown her physical affection or even looked into her eyes. I contend that Xuela's inquiry after her father, which appears to leave her desire for her mother momentarily quelled, is in fact a struggle to maintain a connection to the man who represents her only living tie to her deceased birth mother. In *Autobiography*, the narrator's relation to mother tongue carries strong implications for the category of motherhood—especially questions concerning the "authenticity" of a mother. The fact that only a literal connection to biological mother permits an immediate connection to the mother['s]-tongue suggests Xuela's belief that only a birth mother can be a "real" mother and establish certain connections to culture and homeland.

Kincaid's manipulation of the term "mother tongue" thus illustrates that women are tied to political discourse in ways that entwine both gender and nation. In comparison, because Xuela's father's connection to language occurs on an overtly nationalist level, the ways in which his gender relates to his Caribbean subjectivity are often overlooked. When Alfred Richardson comes to take his daughter to live with him, she observes that he speaks to her in English: the language of education and the upper classes. He does not use French Creole or creolized English, the informal and often intimate languages of the majority of islanders. The narrator notes that her father's "mouth began to curl around the [English] words he spoke, and it made him appear benign, attractive, even kind" (23). His use of English makes the naïve child see him as benevolent, but as she grows more conscious of the effects of colonialism in the West Indies, she recognizes the deceptive veneers of the imperial language and the paternalistic colonial government, and how her father, the patriarch, is embroiled in these systems.

Xuela later observes that her father speaks Creole only with the family members and people who have known him since childhood: those who know his true roots and from whom he cannot escape. She associates his speaking Creole with expressions of his "real self" (190)—an African-Caribbean self—a self that embarrasses him, however, and which he tries to keep hidden beneath a facade of European propriety. The narrator's linking of Creole with a racialized, ethnicized identity and her suspicion of her father's Eurocentric manipulation of English in order to garner respect and power suggest the works of numerous contemporary Caribbean poets, such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Louise Bennett, who reject the "master languages" in favor of vernacular speech patterns that Brathwaite has labeled Nation Language (113).<sup>11</sup> Xuela's awareness thus marks the emergence of her nationalist identity.

When her father dies, seventy years after her birth, Xuela expresses regret and slight resentment at their lack of communication. "And finally," she remarks, "my father had at last died and he died not knowing me, not ever speaking to me in a language in which I could have faith, a language in which I could believe the things he said" (223). Kincaid's drawing of connections between Alfred Richardson and the English language parallels Michelle Cliff's depiction of a similar affiliation in *No Telephone to Heaven*. The latter author identifies Boy Savage as one who speaks "in the King's tongue" (98); thus, Jennie, the daughter who is taken back with Boy's wife Kitty to Jamaica, speaks "her mother's language," while her sister Clare, raised by her assimilation-obsessed father in the United States, speaks "her father's adopted tongue" (104). When Clare finally returns to Jamaica and joins up with a rebel group, she longs to speak Coromantee, the dying language of the people of the hills, descendants of the maroons: "A tongue she could not speak. She who was educated in several tongues, the mastery of which should have . . . stifled her longing to know Coromantee" (106). It cannot fail to be recognized that Clare's desire to know this ancestral language ends the chapter in which her mother dies, and she verbalizes her sense of betrayal by this woman who left her with her father, abandoning them and the States for her life back in Jamaica. The absence of and subsequent yearning for the language, an apparent mother tongue, parallels the absence of and longing for the mother.

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Both writers' representations of "standard"-English-speaking fathers correspond interestingly to Nourbese Philip's discourse on language. Because of the history of colonialism, Nourbese Philip identifies English as a "father tongue" for those of African-Caribbean heritage:

English  
is my mother tongue.  
A mother tongue is not  
not a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
l/anguish  
anguish  
—a foreign anguish.

English is  
my father tongue.  
A father tongue is  
a foreign language,  
therefore English is a foreign language  
not a mother tongue. (*She Tries* 30)

In Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*, the narrator identifies the British explorer's language as his "turgid phallused word" and describes trying "to birth the monstrous product of his word and my silence" (27 and 26, respectively). This image is developed in the writer's other works: in "Discourse on the Logic of Language," she suggests comparisons between the tongue and the penis (*She Tries* 33), and in an article in the essay collection *Out of the Kumbla*, she describes the cultural violence practiced upon non-Europeans in the Caribbean as "linguistic rape" ("Absence" 277).

She continues:

My quest as a writer/poet is to discover my mother tongue, or whether or not peoples such as us may ever claim to possess such a thing.

Since I continue to write in my father tongue, what I need to engender by some alchemical process . . . [is] a metamorphosis within the language from father tongue to mother tongue. In that process some aspects of the language will be destroyed, new ones created. (278)

English can be viewed as the "father tongue" in that it is a language weighted toward the male perspective; only in recent years have efforts been made to search and mold the language in order to create gender-inclusive phrases and terminology. Literary critic Susheila Nasta concurs: "in a post-colonial context, whether African, Caribbean or South Asian, this language carries with it a whole history of patriarchal myths and symbols whether originally instituted by the colonial power or later by primarily

male-dominated movements towards nationalism and independence. Thus, it is 'father tongue' too" (xiii).<sup>12</sup>

These gendered parental metaphors unfortunately risk the promotion of dangerously essentialist thinking. Nourbese Philip's ideological framework naturalizes motherhood and centers mothers and mother tongues in the home/land while fathers, "foreign" and outside the realm of familiarity, are excluded from any stake in constructing a language of freedom. Françoise Lionnet makes a similar move when she observes that, in 1915, the Francophone writer Edmond Laforest drowned "from the weight of the book [the Larousse dictionary], the Law of the colonial fathers, which prevented him from floating and surviving in the flowing current of a muddy river, that uncanny symbol of a devalued maternal heritage with its supposedly irrational, unfiltered, and numbed oral traditions" (2). The critic constructs a problematic binary: the colonial order and French language are coded male and read as the Father in an attempt to align them with certain oppressive, often patriarchal, structures, and the landscape as well as the African-based and Caribbean creolized cultures correspond to the maternal. Lionnet further reinscribes maternity into the Caribbean space by uncritically identifying Haitian Creole as "the mothertongue." These oppositions often serve to be more constrictive than freeing in their implications for women and Caribbean subjectivity. Just as the "standard" English "father tongue" does not only serve the colonial enterprise and has been appropriated in the service of Caribbean nationalist causes, the "mother tongue" can easily be used to dominate women and reify patriarchal as well as colonial doctrines.<sup>13</sup>

Nourbese Philip begins to deconstruct these reductive linguistic categories when she reclaims English as a language that African-diasporic people are entitled to call their own: "For too long . . . we have been verbal or linguistic squatters, possessing adversely what is truly ours. . . . It is probably the hardest part that yet remains, this reclaiming of our image-making power in what has been for a long time foreign language, but it must be done" ("Absence" 277).<sup>14</sup> She subverts the English/Creole, "father tongue"/"mother tongue" binary by refusing to idealize creolized language forms as the "mother tongue." Nourbese Philip writes that Caribbean English is "a language capable of great rhythms and musicality; one that is and is not English" (277). However, accepting this "non-standard" language as the mother tongue is a romanticized notion that does nothing to change the oppression of African-descended peoples that occurs on the linguistic level. Thus, whether using "standard" English or Creole, she calls for the recreation of images behind the words, an explosion of the constricting notions of identity and propriety in favor of a mother tongue that "begins to serve our purposes."

In Kincaid's *Autobiography*, Xuela's perceptions of her father and his uses of language debunk the Eurocentric, elitist veneration of "standard" English. At the same time, the narrator's insights also cohere with Nourbese Philip's warning against the romanticization of Creole: Alfred Richardson's ability to speak Creole by no means suggests his adherence to a nationalist agenda. Although he can speak his "mother tongue," he in no way identifies with the majority of people who also speak this Nation Language. Nothing suggests that Richardson's "African-Caribbean-ness" is "real" or substantial simply because he can speak Creole. Arguing for an "authen-



tic" Caribbean subjectivity based upon language leads one into dangerous territory. The definition of the so-called "authentic" Caribbean citizen as the one who speaks the Creole "mother-tongue" can be hazardingly exclusionary and deceptive, (re-)creating hierarchies based upon arbitrary groupings.<sup>15</sup>

Kincaid uses Creole to trouble notions of nationalist subjectivity in the case of Xuela's stepmother as well. Xuela's stepmother speaks to her in French patois when they are alone, and in English when they are in the presence of Xuela's father. Like Alfred Richardson, she is contemptuous of Creole. The narrator observes that for her father's wife, Creole is "an attempt . . . to make an illegitimate of me, to associate me with the made-up language of people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low." Xuela realizes the intricate struggle for power that occurs on the level of the spoken word—a reminder, once again, of how words can serve as "a source of pain." She comes to identify the possibility of losing speech as "delicious" (*Autobiography* 30–31, 7, and 51, respectively).

When Xuela turns fifteen, her father—recognizing the need to remove his daughter from his second wife's presence—sends her to the capital city of Roseau to live in the home of Jacques and Lise LaBatte. In exchange for her room and board, Xuela performs household tasks for "Monsieur" and "Madame." The relationship between the Xuela and Lise LaBatte runs counter to the dynamic between the narrator and her stepmother, and signifies the ways in which Xuela learns to use Creole as the language of women. When she and Lise are alone, they also converse in French patois—the language of the "illegitimate." Both women are considered illegitimate in society because of their gender. Although Lise holds a modicum of social power because of her class and is called "Madame LaBatte," she is de-legitimized because she cannot bear children. Because she is a woman in a sexist society, childbearing is seen as her primary function, and once she cannot perform it, she becomes one of the "illegitimate." Interestingly, when she confirms the narrator's pregnancy, Lise speaks to Xuela in English, not Creole. Her voice holds tenderness and she is happy about Xuela's condition, but she employs the formal language of oppression for their conversation. The use of English, the so-called "father-tongue," marks her complicity with patriarchal dictates for the oppression of women—including her own. Xuela adamantly refuses to find herself mired in this submission to the male order; she has an abortion and announces a refusal to bear children for the rest of her life.

Besides being identified as the language of the illegitimate, Creole is also named as "the language of the captive" by the narrator (74). Madame LaBatte is a captive in that she is trapped by her submission to the dictates of "proper" womanhood, including being bound in a marriage to a man whom she loves but who does not love her. While Xuela resides with the LaBattes as a boarder/servant, a young black woman with no financial means of independent survival and no influence in society, she, too, exists as captive. In a parallel to the linguistic-political resistance enacted by members of various Caribbean nationalist movements, Creole in the LaBatte household becomes a means of specifically female resistance to social propriety. The two women rebel by choosing "to speak their own tongue, to speak their own condition, [and at this moment] they are out of place. . . . The other is not where it is supposed to be. . . . [She] has somehow escaped from control" (Hall 187).

This use of language is reminiscent of the scene described in Haitian writer Edwidge Danticat's epilogue to *Krik? Krak!* The women teach the narrator to speak and constantly prod her to use the voice and language they have passed down to her. Danticat writes of ancestors who ask for her voice to break the "terrifying" silences under which they find themselves burdened, and identifies her mother as the person responsible for her ability to break the silence: "Your mother, she introduced you to the first echoes of the tongue that you now speak" (224). Similarly, in her autobiographical essay "From the Poets in the Kitchen," Paule Marshall refers to the Barbadian immigrant housewives and mothers of her childhood as inspiritors. This "set of giants," used talk as a refuge, as a restoration of identity, as a salve for the humiliations of their work as domestics in the baffling vastness of the United States. The "mother's tongue" serves as a site of active resistance to the dominant patriarchal ideology. "Students" of the language enter into a cycle in which they will eventually engage in this symbolic form of rebellion as well by passing on what they know.

In Kincaid's text, language becomes the means by which Xuela and Lise bond beneath the yoke of oppression. Adrienne Rich characterizes this dynamic as inherent to mothers and daughters: "Mothers and daughters have always exchanged with each other—beyond the verbally transmitted lore of female survival—a knowledge that is subliminal, subversive, preverbal: the knowledge flowing between two alike bodies, one of which has spent nine months inside the other" (220). But what we see in Kincaid's narrative is that race, colonialism, and nationalism are a more integral part of the dynamic than biology. Xuela and Lise's mother-daughter relationship is conditioned by their specifically colonial social existence. Rich assumes that the type of deep communication described can only occur between mothers and the daughters they have physically borne. She later states:

Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with charges than the flow of energy between two biologically alike bodies, one of which has lain in amniotic bliss inside the other, one of which has labored to give birth to the other. The materials are here for the deepest mutuality and the most painful estrangement. (225–26)

I would ask: What about the foster-mother/foster child relationships in the Caribbean, where the child is left with a relative immediately after her birth while her mother moves to New York, Toronto, Paris, or London to find work? What about the child born after an unwanted pregnancy? I must argue with Rich's conception of the relationship between biological mother and child as "the great original source and experience of love" (32). The relationship has the *potential* to be the "great original source," but this is not always the case, and this is something that must be recognized, or women will forever be stranded in their roles as mothers and nurturers, entirely responsible for the world's affection and emotion.<sup>16</sup>

This type of wordless mother-daughter communication does indeed occur in Kincaid's other works. In *At the Bottom of the River*, the narrator describes how "My mother and I wordlessly made an arrangement—I sent out my beautiful sighs; she

received them" (56). In *Lucy*, the title character also achieves a profound level of non-verbal communication with her mother, despite her attempts at emotional distance: "My past was my mother; I could hear her voice, and she spoke to me not in English or the French patois that she sometimes spoke, or in any language that needed help from the tongue; she spoke to me in a language *anyone female* could understand" (90, emphasis added).

Although the wordless communication takes place between a biological mother and daughter, however, Kincaid stresses the bonds of gender and not those exclusive to blood relations. In the same way, Lise and Xuela in *The Autobiography of My Mother* explode the narrow biological conception of the mother-daughter relationship. When the protagonist first arrives at the LaBatte residence, Madame LaBatte tells her to make herself at home. She asks Xuela to consider her as if she were Xuela's mother. Lise lovingly washes and combs the narrator's hair on several occasions, moving into the position of affectionate nurturer. The two women quickly progress to a first-name basis, accentuating their friendship and erasing the power dynamic of servant girl-mistress. Spoken language is one of the means by which the two women bond; however, Xuela and Lise eventually attain such a level of familiarity and understanding that they experience a form of silent communication seemingly akin to the "preverbal" communication between mothers and daughters described and discussed by Rich. Xuela comments: "To communicate so intimately with someone, to be spoken to silently by someone and yet understand more clearly than if she had shouted at the top of her voice, was something I did not experience with anyone ever again in my life" (69). The two women thus disrupt the notion that the biological mother-daughter relationship is the privileged site of deeply intimate communication.

Despite the fact that Xuela achieves this level of communication with Lise and has no idea of the type of communication she would have had with her biological mother—at one point she significantly states: "I do not know in what language she would have said such a thing. I did not know her; she died at the moment I was born" (198)—Xuela refuses any notion of Lise as a mother-figure. For example, when Lise clothes the narrator in dresses that she had worn as a young woman, Xuela becomes exceedingly uncomfortable. She cannot mentally or emotionally handle this mother-daughter mirroring. Xuela eventually flees the LaBatte house, departing "at the very blackest point of the night" to avoid the haunting memory of having Lise see her stage this abandonment (96). Unable to accept the idea of a mother other than the woman who gave birth to her, she dissolves the relationship. In other words, Xuela suffers in part because she refuses to let go of her biological mother and becomes obsessively invested in the notion of the "authentic" mother. I am arguing here that a more productive model of motherhood would be the feeling of connection that stems from nurturing, and not simply the uncontestable biological tie. The category of the "authentic" biological mother must be questioned; restructuring conventional definitions of family is paramount for combatting the reactionary "family values" visions of societies seeking to eradicate all that does not conform to the project of the patriarchy.

While Kincaid wrestles with the issues surrounding biological notions of motherhood, several other authors provide more utopian possibilities. Paule Marshall's *Daughters* is a particularly fruitful text for exploring the benefits of alternative forms of mothering. In this novel, Ursa-Bea MacKenzie is nurtured by three women, all of whom serve different roles in her life. Estelle MacKenzie is her birth mother. Significantly, after Estelle leaves Ursa's bedroom each night, Celestine, the family's housekeeper, stays "marvelling at those feet, legs, arms, that forehead as if they had all been formed in the secrecy of her own flesh." Astral Forde, the lover of the protagonist's father Primus, takes offense at being made to watch Ursa swim at the pool, "like she's some child belonging to me"; however, Astral's best friend Malvern voices that which Astral desires not to see: despite her resentment towards this child, there are many similarities between Astral and Ursa. As Malvern states: "She's you all over" (194, 211, and 216, respectively). Especially important are these characters' teachings of language. Each of the three presents Ursa with a distinct "mother tongue" that varies from "standard" English. From Astral, Ursa learns the shocking words forbidden to women of polite society: "this purple language" (111)—purple in that the words and structure have been twisted, beaten and bruised. Celestine teaches the protagonist Creole. Lastly, Estelle sends Ursa to Connecticut to insure that she learns how to "talk the talk" of the African-American culture of her maternal relatives (228).

Kincaid's explorations of the connections between language, gender, and nationalism take on the starkest political connotations in her representation of Xuela's affair with Philip Bailey. The protagonist works for, seduces, and then marries this white British physician. Their relationship upholds the gendered notions of language in that Xuela speaks the Creole "mothertongue" while Philip speaks English; however, the communications in fact subvert the traditional patriarchal and colonial hierarchy. The author describes the couple as understanding each other best when they speak in the languages of their individual thoughts: Xuela speaks to Philip in Creole, and he speaks to her in English. They have achieved a level of communication in which neither submits to the language of the other, and thus neither seems to dominate the other in their conversations. It becomes clear, however, that outside of their individual, private relationship, Xuela holds the power and has inverted the traditional hierarchy in which the white male colonist is viewed as the superior communicator, and thus a superior being. Once the couple moves from the city of Roseau to rural Dominica, only Xuela can communicate with others. Once the couple moves to the land where Xuela's "mother and the people she was of were born," only the narrator can speak the language of these hills, the language of the Caribbean (206). Philip is, and always will be, a foreigner in this space. Xuela asserts: "He now lived in a world in which he could not speak the language. I mediated for him, I translated for him. . . . I blocked his entrance into all the worlds he had come to know" (224.)

Furthermore, Philip cannot even familiarize himself with the landscape; he constantly stumbles and trips on the ground: "He was not born on it, he would only die on it and asked to be buried facing east, in the direction of the land in which he was born" (218). The scene reveals both characters' belief in the inescapable tie to the land of one's birth. Xuela has effected a return to her mother's land and seems to locate her

sense of self there. Ironically, although she has lived on the island of Dominica for her entire life, she does not recognize having reached the land of “true” belonging until she moves back to the mountains, the place where, very symbolically, her mother and her mother’s people were born. The narrator’s embrace of the “motherland,” particularly her emphasis on its power as the land of origin of her maternal ancestors, coheres with her preoccupation with her biological mother. However, although the novel ends with Xuela’s achievement of this metaphorical maternal connection, Kincaid’s destabilization of the mother tongue and mother love tropes causes the reader to question the implications of this conclusion.

The idea of inescapable bonds to mothers and motherlands links *The Autobiography of My Mother* to the author’s earlier novels. In *Annie John*, Annie seems to reject her mother completely, but at the end of the novel her mother declares, “It doesn’t matter what you do or where you go, I’ll always be your mother and this will always be your home” (147). She asserts that the mother-daughter relationship is an unfailing one; it cannot be ruptured by distance, words, or actions. Similarly, the protagonist of Kincaid’s *Lucy* reads a letter in which her mother proclaims that no matter what, “she would always love me, she would always be my mother, my home would never be anywhere but with her” (128). The notion of an inescapable mother-child tie holds serious implications for the nationalist political discourse. On the one hand, it suggests that the Caribbean subject’s relationship with the island motherland is uncontestable and incorruptible. This was an empowering concept for early postcolonial thinkers who sought to establish a Caribbean-grounded sense of identity; it still serves as a comforting thought for the myriad immigrants who reside outside of the region and suffer feelings of alienation and homesickness. On the other hand, however, this notion of inescapable ties to mothers leaves one in a conundrum when considering the historical situation of the Caribbean. What do Kincaid’s scenarios mean for Caribbean people, who are the products of forced migration and creolization? Where is their “real” motherland? Is it the island home, where several generations have been born and raised? Is it West Africa? India? China? Some combination of the above? Does the notion of an unfailing maternal bond perpetuate the ideology that the relationship with the European “mother country”—whether in terms of government, finances and economy, or cultural influence—is similarly inescapable? To which “motherland” does the child raised in the Caribbean by a British expatriate mother belong?

If *The Autobiography of My Mother* is to be read as national allegory, Xuela’s obsessive inability to break away, either mentally or emotionally, from her biological mother, a symbol for Dominica, would suggest Kincaid’s warning against a similar impulse in Caribbean people. In other words, over-romanticizing the relationship to the home island can be psychologically dangerous. If one leaves one’s homeland, especially for a long period of time, one cannot expect to return unproblematically. The home for which one pines is not simply a geographical place to which one might return; it is a space and a time. Kincaid comments on the changes that inevitably occur in *A Small Place*: “The Antigua that I knew, the Antigua in which I grew up . . . no longer exists. That Antigua no longer exists partly for the usual reason, the passing of time” (23). In the same way, generations of people long-separated from the African

continent cannot return unproblematically there; Xuela's relationship with the mother she never knew can be interpreted as the relationship between the African-Caribbean subject and a correspondingly unknown Mother Africa. One can clearly see Kincaid's critique—albeit a rather fatalistic one—of a relationship that, if uncritically viewed and overmythologized, can be emotionally and psychologically devastating.

In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat interrogate the false opposition of home and exile, inside and outside. They claim that for the migrant,

home, that place and time outside place and time, appears to mingle promiscuously with its opposite—exile, the outside, elsewhere. Hence its attraction for a critical practice that seeks to undo such binaries as belonging/unbelonging, loyalty/disloyalty, to unpack their ideological baggage, to make visible the multifarious ways in which they participate in the production of social relations as second nature. (Mufti and Shohat 8)

In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Kincaid's implicit condemnation of her protagonist's often-essentializing relationships to biological motherhood, mother tongues, and motherlands undercuts the rigid boundary between "authentic" and "inauthentic" in definitions of womanhood, motherhood, and Caribbean national subjectivity. This destabilization is a crucial step in restructuring social patterns that only serve to keep certain legacies of oppression in place.

#### NOTES

1. Collected in Henri Gaden's 1931 *Proverbes et Maximes Peuls et Toucouleurs*; translated from the French by Trinh T. Minh-ha in "Mother's Talk."
2. Kincaid makes it deceptively easy for readers to follow Xuela's lead and fall into the trap of blaming the mother. Critic Simone Alexander, for example, proclaims: "Unlike the 'conventional' mother-daughter relationship, it is not the presence of a mother (figure) that arouses or awakens Xuela's intense emotions; rather, it is the absence, the loss of her mother, that deprives her of love and loving altogether. . . . The untimely death of her mother, which prohibits her self-growth, is accountable for her intense indifference" (76).
3. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin discuss how vernaculars have been invalidated by "the centre [with] the dismissive terms 'colloquialism' or 'idiom'" (56). They argue for overturning "'concentric' notions of language which regard 'Standard' English as a 'core'" (47). Accordingly, I have put "standard," "vernacular," and "patois" in quotation marks to emphasize the need to interrogate the systems of power and privilege that often employ these terms to reinforce a social hierarchy.
4. Benedict Anderson fails to recognize this when he claims that "Spanish and English were never issues in the revolutionary Americas" (67). His perspective appears to be limited to that of the white European-descended Creole, for whom language was not a concern. Instead of considering the implications of language for people of color in the region, he turns to Ireland for his example of a country where "a metropolitan language" had so rooted itself over centuries of military and political domination that it manifested itself as a vernacular creole language (119).
5. Linguistic colonization was also a matter of course in the North American colonies. In 1609, the London Council of the Virginia Company commanded Sir Thomas Gates, the prospective interim governor of Jamestown, to use force if necessary to educate the Algonquian leaders' children "in English language and manners" so that they would "obey" the European settlers

and “become in time Civill and Christian” (quoted in Cheyfitz 6). Cheyfitz identifies language as key in the Anglo-American imperial enterprise. He elaborates upon the “primal scene from classical rhetoric: . . . an orator through the power of eloquence ‘civilizes’ ‘savage’ humanity” (xx).

6. Take, for example, the fact that once they arrived in the so-called “New” World, some Ewe people chose to speak Yoruba, primarily because it was the language of prominence at that time in Africa. Associations of prestige and power influenced their decision to appropriate the language of another African community, and they were fully able to do so once the decision was made. For further discussion, see the work of Bruce L. Mouser and that of Sandra E. Greene.
7. For a more detailed discussion, see Hilary McD. Beckles’ *Natural Rebels*.
8. The most obvious example, of course, is Shakespeare’s Caliban, the figure of The Colonized in *The Tempest*. His rebellious use of language—cursing Prospero, the one who taught him this language, and proclaiming the theft of his rightful property—has been read as “guerilla action” (Baker 195). Nobel laureate Derek Walcott also views Caliban’s speech as a powerful, though conflicted, act of contestation. He notes that “New World poets who see the ‘classic style’ as stasis . . . cannot separate the rage of Caliban from the beauty of his speech when the speeches of Caliban are equal in their elemental power to those of his tutor. The language of the torturer mastered by the victim” (Walcott 113).
9. Ironically, the English language once had the same position as a “creole” in European society. Before the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxon was the privileged and respected language of the royal court, both for administrative and literary purposes. Latin was used for all court manuscripts immediately after the Conquest, and between 1200 and 1350, was eventually supplanted by Norman French. Among the masses, Norman French and Anglo-Saxon blended to form Early English. Similarly, French was viewed in opposition to Latin, just as the Caribbean Creoles are viewed in opposition to European languages in more modern times.
10. I also contest Anderson’s categorizations of genetic heritage and gender as inescapable. A prime example lies in the practice of “passing” that exists in many societies—particularly racial, but also in terms of gender and sexual orientation—and what it signifies in terms of the construction of identity.
11. The majority of Brathwaite’s poems are written in what he calls “my magical realism, the dub riddims and nation language and calibanisms” (113).
12. Nasta’s reasons for classifying English as a “father-tongue” seem to lie in the actual vocabulary and structure of the language, rather than in the history of its dissemination, which is one of Nourbese Philip’s focal concerns.
13. For a discussion of how nationalist vocabularies that have been developed in male-dominated movements “implicate women in certain paradoxes of identity and affiliation” (4), see Elleke Boehmer’s “Stories of Women and Mothers.” In the U.S. context, Donald Goellnicht discusses how the “mother tongue” circumscribes the protagonist of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* as it simultaneously “subverts and enshrines patriarchal culture at one and the same time” (127).
14. Among the many postcolonial writers who claim “rights” to the English language and dominant genres is Raja Rao, who asserts: “English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up—like Sanskrit or Persian was before” (Ashcroft, et al 61).
15. Anderson warns against identifying the use of certain languages with national identification: “Nothing suggests that Ghanaian nationalism is any less real than Indonesian simply because its national language is English rather than Ashanti” (133). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin also address false connections between language and cultural authenticity in *The Empire Writes Back*.
16. Rich herself warns against this ideology in other portions of the text: she questions the assumption that “a ‘natural’ mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children” (22); she fervently rejects the idea that a mother’s love “is, and should be, quite literally selfless” (22); she describes being haunted by the stereotype of “unconditional” maternal love (23); she claims to grow more and more “unambivalent” towards her babies as time passes (15), thus deconstructing the idea of “natural” maternal love.

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